Getting Personal

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ABSTRACT

Start with yourself. The author first got this advice when planning a World War II program for British primary students and continues to bring this philosophy into her teaching. During the past year, the author has used personal stories to connect with current and prospective students and to paint a picture of the real life of a librarian. She also makes a space for students to talk about themselves, creating a feeling of "we're all in this together" and providing them a greater sense of agency in these uncertain times. Getting personal will continue to serve us as educators in the coming years as we train students who are whole human beings and will bring themselves to their libraries and classrooms.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education; online learning; students; school libraries.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

storytelling; community; personal stories; agency.

I'M THE AMERICAN IN FRONT OF THEM

Libby wanted me to present on World War II. I was living in Norwich, England and volunteering with the 2nd Air Division Memorial Library, a living memorial to the Americans who were stationed in Norwich during World War II. I had already done some programs on American culture for school children across Norfolk County, but Libby, the librarian, wanted my next program to be on World War II.

As a children's librarian, I was very comfortable creating a collection of American children's picture books for the Memorial Library, and doing read alouds and story times based around American culture. However, history was never my best subject in school, and what I did

learn about World War II, I learned in America. We think about the war a little differently in America, than they do in England. We like to think we came in and saved the day. The British had a saying about the American GIs back then. “They’re over paid, over sexed, and over here!” I felt completely unqualified to teach British school children about their local WWII history.

The Memorial Library is a wonderful resource and I gave myself a crash course in WWII. I started putting together a slideshow including images from the library’s collection. It was shaping up to be an okay presentation, but I still didn’t feel great about it.

The week before I was scheduled to deliver the WWII presentation, Libby invited me to a lunch the library was hosting for some American WWII veterans who were already in town for another event. At the lunch I was seated next to the wife of one of the veterans and she was interested to learn about my work with the library. It came up that I had this WWII program the next week and I admitted to her that I wasn’t sure I was the right person for the job. Without hesitating she said, “Oh, just talk about yourself.”

I was confused. “But the program is about the Americans in Norwich during WWII. What does that have to do with me?”

“You’re the American standing in front of them.” She said. “They’ll want to know about you.”

I thought about this, and back at my flat, I began to rework my program. The next week, when I stood before a class of third year students in the Memorial Library, I opened with a slide that showed two Waffle Houses: A Waffle House in Atlanta, Georgia, and a Waffle House in Norwich, UK. If you’re not familiar with the American Waffle House chain, they are diners that serve bacon, eggs, hash browns, waffles, etc. Drive south and/or east on the interstate and you’ll start seeing Waffle House signs on the exits.

The Atlanta Waffle House was the last place my husband and I ate before we left for England. The local Waffle House was the first place we ate in Norwich. The Norwich Waffle House is not part of the American diner chain. They serve Belgian waffles. These can be sweet waffles with fruit and syrups. The waffles can be part of a full English breakfast. They also serve savory dishes with a waffle substituted for the usual starch: curry over a waffle instead of rice, bolognese over a waffle instead of pasta. I used this Waffle House comparison to talk about differences I had experienced in food, while living as an American in Norwich.

Next, I put up a slide that had a picture of the car I sold before moving to Norwich, next to the bicycle I bought after I moved there. I talked about differences I experienced in transportation: vehicles on the other side of the road, roundabouts, and rarely riding in a car while in England. I usually walked, biked, or took public transportation.

I put up a slide that compared some American and British terms. We know the English call cookies, biscuits and chips, crisps. I really enjoyed that the plastic trash cans that go on the side of the road on pick up day are called “wheelie bins” over there. I also pointed out that most Americans pronounce Norwich like sandwich, but Britons pronounce Norwich like porridge.

From there, I seamlessly moved on to talking about the experiences of the Americans stationed in Norwich during WWII. I had read a first person account about an older British couple who tried to make a Southern fried chicken dinner for some of the Americans. The chicken was cold and the breading was wrong, but they ate it anyway to be polite.

The American GIs rode bicycles like I did, and had some near misses when they forgot which way traffic was going. They sometimes got lost when traveling out of town, both because

they didn't know their way around, and because of how the British pronounce place names. The Americans would ask for directions, but then wouldn't realize that "Wymondham" was the spelling of a place they heard pronounced "Windam."

Then we talked about WWII airplanes, made paper airplanes, and flew the paper airplanes inside the library. After the presentation, kids hung around to talk to me. They wanted to hear my funny American accent, ask me about my experiences, and sometimes tell me about their travels to America.

I'M THE LIBRARIAN IN FRONT OF THEM

When I moved back to the Atlanta area and got a job as an elementary librarian, I found myself once again doing things I was very comfortable doing: reading aloud, teaching students how to use the library and do research. However, I continued to start with myself. I was the reader and researcher in front of my students. They wanted to know about me and what these things meant to me. I told them about my favorite books, both as a child and as an adult. I told them about my experiences looking for, using, and creating information.

I do this still, as a professor and director of a library media program. I am the librarian in front of my students. I tell stories, like this one, about my time working in libraries. These stories convey not only what a librarian does, but also what it feels like to be a librarian.

My personal stories bring my students closer to the lived experience of being a librarian. They will have this experience themselves in their fieldwork and later on the job, but stories are as close as we can get to the lived experience while in the classroom together. There is also extensive research on how stories can be used to teach in general. In their book, *The Power of Story: Teaching Through Storytelling*, Collins and Cooper (1997) list several reasons for using storytelling in the classroom. Some of the reasons most relevant to LIS education include: storytelling "refines speaking skills" (p. 13), "improves listening skills" (p. 13), "allows students to interact with adults [or instructors] on a personal level" (p. 14), "enhances writing skills" (p. 14), "enhances critical and creative thinking skills" (p. 16), "nourishes students' intuitive side" (p. 16), and "helps students understand their own and others' cultural heritage" (p. 17).

There has been recent research on using a related performance art, improvisation, to teach library reference skills. Vardell (2020) found that having students complete improv exercises in class helped them practice soft skills necessary for reference librarianship including thinking on their feet, listening, and not making assumptions.

I share my personal librarianship journey with my students to demonstrate that I have been where they are. I am still relatively new in my current roles and want my students to know that I understand how hard they are working. Like many of my current students, I earned my school library certification while employed full time in a school library. Previous research on personal storytelling indicates that the deeper message of many personal stories is "you are not alone," and sharing personal stories truly does help listeners realize that others have gone through life struggles similar to their own (Nelson, 2019).

Collins and Cooper (1997) "find that family [personal] stories bring us together" and they begin introducing "a new group of tellers" to one another by having them share "family" stories (p. 23). Personal stories build rapport, which is important for me both with my students and with

prospective students. I tell my librarian stories to advertise the library media program at local conferences. Conference attendees like sessions with storytelling because they are an entertaining break. Perhaps my stories can also help them decide whether a career in librarianship is right for them. I am also, in some ways, selling myself, as the director of the program. Prospective students may choose my program because they feel they know me and find me relatable.

When we are struggling, that is when we need personal stories and connections the most. Covid-19 has made it more difficult to keep our work/school and personal lives separate. We hold video meetings, often from home. Students and colleagues can see our surroundings. For months I worked on my enclosed front porch, and most of my meetings began with someone exclaiming, "You're outside?" My children occasionally pop on screen and even pause to say "hi" to colleagues of mine they know.

THEY'RE THE STUDENTS IN FRONT OF ME

At the same time, many of us are craving human interaction. I opened my one face to face class in the fall with a check in each week. Students commented in evaluations that they really appreciated this. Some weeks no one had much to say. But, one week a student spoke up about how hard it was to get all their work done with so many online classes. We discussed this and I began to understand better how time management was taking up more of my students time than ever before. Another week a student asked how everyone else deals with stress and anxiety and got thoughtful, helpful suggestions from other students. Our class wasn't just a learning environment, it was a "we're all in this together" environment.

I am not able to meet with students in my office during the pandemic as it is not large enough to keep six feet of distance, and so all of my posted office hours are online. I left time at the end of my face to face class for students to talk to me and many did. They asked typical questions about assignments and courses for the next semester. One student, though, regularly stayed after class to work, and ended up chatting about her job, her dog, and other things going on in her life. After our first meeting of the semester I realized how important it was for me to hold this space for my students, a space where we could just talk.

Carson (2008) explains how personal storytelling can give an individual "agency," a term she defines as "the capacity to act on one's own behalf" (p. 177). In these difficult times, students may need something in their lives they feel they have more control over. Just the act of talking about their lives can give them some of that agency. They can't control all that has happened to them, but they can control how they tell the story. It helps to have people who will listen.

In listening to my students, I of course was not just doing them a favor, but getting to know them better. "When you tell a story you invoke a power that is greater than the sum of the facts you report. It has emotional content and delivers a contextual framework and a wisdom that reaches past logical rational analysis" (Simmons, 2006, p. 80). I learned about how their roles as students in my classes fit into the larger context of their lives. I already knew, factually, that they

had other classes, jobs, relationships, etc. However, in listening to them narrate their lives' events I came to a deeper understanding.

I met with an independent study student every two weeks by video conference and she also often chatted with me after we had talked about class work. Sometimes she would apologize and say, "I think I just miss talking to people." Don't we all? I took the time to talk with her. She is the student in front of me. I want to know about her.

Most of my students are going to work in school libraries. In this difficult moment, my stories entertained them, made me relatable, and brought to life what I was teaching. This moment was a little less difficult because they could also talk about their personal lives, or just talk. I encourage them to bring themselves to their work as librarians. They will be the readers and researchers in front of their students. I encourage them to listen to their students. This is what will get us through the next difficult moment.

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